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ABSTRACT

Of the various unrelated approaches used in advanced college composition courses, one has proved especially successful in encouraging professionalism in student writers: an approach in which students are required to write for and submit their work to professional publications. When students write articles, they deal with many rhetorical modes and techniques, pulling together all the traditional techniques taught in freshman composition courses. In an advanced composition course at Southeast Missouri State University, students first study and write personal essays. They then generate their own writing topics for journal articles (aided by the instructor if necessary), review basic writing techniques, and write the first draft of their articles. Student/instructor conferences are held as needed, and all completed manuscripts are read in class. Students also write other types of materials. Student articles have been published in local, regional, statewide, and national publications. College English teachers, who in the past have not demonstrated much concern about what the advanced composition course should entail, should share their views about this course, as well as techniques that have proved successful in it. (GW)

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Writing to Be Read

Advanced Composition--what is it? A survey of college bulletins and NCTE journals will quickly reveal a wide range of approaches--creative writing, technical writing, mass communication studies, the extension of freshman composition, advanced expository writing for English majors, and the generative rhetoric of Christensen. The recipients are usually a mixture of English majors who have tested our of freshman composition and majors from other disciplines making a last ditch effort to acquire skills either never developed or attrited since taking freshman composition. Though the catalogue descriptions are formidable in intellectual approach, the course really is open to students representing the gamut of ability. Even most of the English majors seldom possess superior writing ability, despite their having written many papers in their Literature courses.

In the December, 1970, issue of College Composition and Communication, Duane C. Nichols despaired of the current variegated courses carrying the label of advanced composition. Nor was his view of the future very hopeful as he warned against unstudied innovation, calling for the simple improvement of writing skills.

Nevertheless, at least two of the contributors of articles on advanced composition in the College Composition and Communication present a consistent point of view. They teach writing for an audience outside the college community; they teach writing for publication--the article.

Aside from the Nichols' article which addresses the state of the art, only two articles found in a survey of the journals back to 1962, as I discovered, represent a different point of view: Donald M. Murray described a fiction writing approach in "Henry James in the Advanced Composition Course," College English (Oct. 1963); and Francis Christensen suggested his generative approach to the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay in "The Course in Advanced Composition for Teachers," College Composition and Communication (May 1973).

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

In the ten years preceding my own first teaching of advanced composition, the NCTE journals had published only two articles on the subject, besides the "Guidelines and Directions for College Courses in Advanced Composition," CCC (Dec. 1967), a report which though still valid offers little specific information on teaching techniques.

In June of 1972, I was faced with the elemental questions "What do I want to do in this course? What should the students do? How do we accomplish the goals once they are determined?" The answer lay in the word advanced. If this were to be truly an advanced course in which the students did more than simply practice various techniques, then what they wrote should exhibit advanced, that is, professional, characteristics. And professionalism, I felt, could best be encouraged and accomplished by requiring the students to write for and submit their work to editors of newspapers, magazines and journals. Such a requirement would easily face the question of relevance of assignments and writing topics, and acceptance or rejection from an outside source would reinforce my own evaluation of the students' accomplishment. It has been six years since I first required students to submit their articles and personal essays for publication. Since then over forty-two percent of the students taking my course have been published. Not all of the best work has been printed, and some of the poorest has. But this situation simply introduced the students to what happens in the "real world" of freelancing and writing for professional journals (compare your own rejected masterpieces to some of the articles appearing in the NCTE journals during the late '60s and early '70s). The students' response during the last six years has verified the validity of the writing for publication approach. It is a requirement I shall continue throughout my teaching career.

From the outset of that first course in 1972, though convinced of the rightness of my goals, I often felt a sense of aloneness, especially being in a department where the four or five colleagues who occasionally also taught the course followed the traditional approach of practice writings alone. But I was not alone. In the CCC May issues of 1974 and 1976, Donald Stewart and Michael P. Orth respectively described their advanced composition courses which focus on writing the article to be submitted for publication. Orth in particular described his course as a way of making advanced composition more than a review of freshman composition, while meeting the needs of a multi-discipline class. The success reported by these journal contributors indicates that writing for publication obviously has merit. Orth and Stewart represent at least one consistent point of view about how the course might be taught among the five NCTE journal contributors who have addressed the issue of advanced composition as such since 1962.

One of the foremost objections to the publication requirement is that it smacks of journalism. It seems too crass a requirement for students immersed in the belles-lettres. But that objection may be overcome very easily by consulting the Thrall and Hibbard Handbook to Literature. Here the history of the essay is sketched from Montaine's "attempts" to the magazine article. Thus, the article is merely the extension of the genre established by Montaigne and supposedly taught in most freshman composition courses. Indeed, the beauty of teaching the article -- whether it be written for the newspaper, the magazine, or the professional journal -- is that it pulls together all of the traditional techniques stressed in freshman composition. The article itself is defined by Thrall and Hibbard as "a type of essay that is impersonal and largely factual. In an article the author writes as an authority on a subject and presents his argument and information in a

systematic fashion." Though we may discuss the four classic rhetorical modes and the different types of paragraph development, it is not necessary to practice each one individually. Hardly any professional writer follows a single mode, though anthologists for freshman readers would have us believe so with their neatly categorized essays. But as Francis Christensen so aptly echoes Albert Kitzhaber, the first 500-word theme precipitates all the problems of rhetorical modes, invention, arrangement, style, diction, grammar, and whatever else you think of that applies to the complex activity called writing. Rather than concentrate on individual techniques, in the article it is possible to be concerned simultaneously with all the rhetorical modes and techniques. But control of these presumes familiarity which can be provided through general discussion of the purpose and construction of the article. Such a discussion, I have found, is necessary for the benefit of English major who tested out of freshman composition. That is one of the reasons I regard freshman composition as a worthwhile course.

Those who would object to any genre beyond the essay demonstrate an appalling ignorance of what characterizes the world of magazines and journals. Though personal essays are still being written, many of them quite charming, most are being written by professionals long-established in their careers. But as The Writers' Market stresses to the novice writer hoping to break into freelancing, the real market is for the factual article.

Because the article did evolve from the personal essay, I begin the course of instruction with that genre. I do so to demonstrate the evolution of the essay and to destroy some of the prejudices about writing which students bring with them to class. They are first asked to critique an award-winning personal essay. I reveal neither the author's name nor the high praise he has won. Invariably, ninety percent of the students, perhaps feeling the power of their

ability to critique as acquired in their literature studies, brashly and collectively find a very inept author. When informed otherwise by a few perceptive classmates, they demand and get a close analysis of the various accomplishments of the writer. Then the students are asked to write their own personal essays and challenged to do as well as the author whom they so severely criticized. Most seldom do as well but occasionally a student will be able to transcend the personal point of view and create a publishable essay. Our widest audience here has been in The Missouri Conservationist, published by the State Conservation Department. The goal in this assignment is to get the student to elevate his view from his own navel and analyze what in his experience and thought can be universalized to a wider audience. So from the very first, the students are asked to consider a major characteristic of writing -- it is a private act which becomes public. And public scrutiny demands of the writer what every editor knows in the marrow of his bones -- awareness of the reader. It is a point which every writer would do well to keep in mind. As Wayne Booth says in his Rhetoric of Fiction, even novelists must be rhetorically minded. The necessity of criticism, revision, and rewriting is self-evident to each writer, especially when he knows that each essay will be read in class -- no one escapes the public scrutiny. From this assignment we go on immediately to the article, though most students are still writing successive drafts of the personal essay, some as many as four or five times. The point is that the writing has to be as good as the writer can make it; the instructor does not have to accept slipshod work. Of course, conferences are required if more than a second draft is necessary.

In surveying the article, we first distinguish the audiences and their requirements in the newspaper, magazine, and journal markets. Again audience is crucial. And the point must be made that the writer is not prostituting

his talents before the great unwashed, but rather is putting his ability to control the writing to the ultimate test.

The next step is to generate the idea, one of the most difficult tasks of the entire semester. Because I have kept a scrapbook of all the published manuscripts, I am able to verify to each new class that those who have gone before them have succeeded. The hare and tortoise fable is true here. Those who are over-confident remain unpublished, and those who are frightened when they learn of the major assignment for the first time are the very ones who get their names and work into print. They succeed because they are open to suggestions and instruction. And above all, they are willing to revise until the manuscript is as good as we together can make it. Those who are not able to generate their own topics are invited to a conference during which I attempt to help the students draw topics out of their own interests and knowledge. If that method fails, I then suggest some ideas from my own little notebook of possible topics. When I think of one, I simply file it away for future use. Some of these topics have been filed for as long as three years before being used. As you must know, there is no great secret to generating usable topics. What it takes is simply keeping an open eye, having an inquiring mind, having a curiosity which is not easily embarrassed. Some free-lancers use the yellow pages to generate ideas. It is at this point that some of the principles which are stressed in the freshman rhetorics show themselves to be so clearly true. That point about the observant eye, seeing and presenting the detail, is an absolute requirement in being able to generate and write the publishable article.

Once the idea is accepted, it must be subjected to several tests: has it been done before? if so, how glutted is the market? does it fit into the range of topics allowed by the publication? can the writer get all the necessary information? does it require pictures and can they be taken or obtained? can

the article be written in the length, style and tone required by the publication? can the writer analyze the needs of the reader regarding the particular topic? The last question to be asked after the writer has answered all the others and even conducted some basic research is whether he is really interested in the idea. If he is not, that disinterest will be evident in the writing in all ways--point of view, style, tone, organization, development, grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. But the writer must be fair; he must not simply dismiss every idea out of hand before applying all the tests. Often students have told me that they were not much interested in the topic at the outset but that interest grew during the writing. Of course, interest reaches its apogee when the article is published. For those student writers for whom marriage with the idea is acceptable, fundamental problems in the areas just mentioned virtually disappear. You might object that this is self-evident and that the secret to teaching writing is just to find a way to get students extremely interested in the topics they write about. But it is not so simple. Beyond the interest factor, the best writing occurs when the student is aware of what he is doing and is able to control and even to describe his techniques.

The students are now ready for basic instruction in writing techniques. We review introductions and thesis statements, using the terms lead and lead-in instead; we review paragraphing and organizational and developmental techniques; we stress detail and the importance of quotations to give the reader a sense of dialogue with people in the article; and we cover stylistics because most of the students have no sense of the melody or sentence structure of the language they use. We analyze articles from various publications for these elements and then I test their recognition and critical ability by giving them an article to critique. In a very real sense, actual publications are the best textbooks. In further assignments, they construct a taxonomy of prose types/genres survey

article types and the range of leads in a single issue of a magazine; justify the suitability of their article to their chosen publication; write a critique review of their rhetoric text (William Zinsser's On Writing Well, an excellent text published by Harper and Row); and finally, write the first draft of their article.

I give this first draft a quick reading, making general comments only about the limitation, lead, lead-in, appeal to the reader, development, and above all, details. Only the most troublesome articles will get a first-draft reading in class. If revision is needed beyond the second draft, the students are required to arrange conferences to ensure that each difficulty and editorial suggestion is understood. And ninety-nine percent of the students do require conferences. Often in conference I am able to resolve difficulties which could not be done in the privacy of my study or office. All completed manuscripts do receive a reading in class. It is imperative that the students see what each other is writing. Public reading creates confidence and a sense of unity in the group, besides spurring each to complete his project.

Other activities during the last part of the semester while the article is being written involve the letter of query, which is indeed sent to the publisher; the profile interview, which helps the students develop a sense of dialogue; parodies of well-anthologized poems, which allow the students to apply what they have learned about style; rebuses; lipograms; rhopalics, univocalics, and stinky pinkies, all of which introduce the students to the sheer fun of playing with language.

What the course boils down to is a lot of work with the basic principles of writing, without playing musical chairs, from one innovation to the next. It is a quite traditional approach. And perhaps it is indeed not complex nor intellectual. But if the students learn how to communicate, as evidenced by

publication, it must be said to be valid. Certainly it is advanced. And the students themselves feel that they have taken a professional step. Often after publication they come to the office hoping to surprise me with the news, but if they are not betrayed by the beaming smiles, the twinkling eyes do. And besides, a publication credit on the resume sets each apart from those who have none, an important asset in these job-tight days when the teacher of writing often gets preference to the teacher of literature.

Such a course, I believe, is broad-based. The writing is creative; it is technical; it is career-oriented; it is professional; it is, above all, humanistic.

What kinds of articles do the students write? Thus far we have articles on Ozark woven white pine baskets, museum collections, art murals, foxhounds, feeding wild birds, women's liberation in deer hunting, substitute teaching, numerous personality profiles, geographical features, various aspects of sports, university features, stained glass windows in Victorian houses, topics on city government, genealogy prior to "Roots," hobbies, community services and events, and commemoratives. These types of articles and many others have been mainly published in the local and hometown newspapers of the students; in regional magazines such as the Ozark Mountaineer (whose editor told one student that if she could do what she promised in 600 words, he would be over to take lessons), the Ozark Graphic, The Red Ranger (a hunting magazine); campus journals, and state-wide publications such as School and Community (the journal of the Missouri State Teachers Association), and Missouri Conservationist. We currently have three acceptances by Missouri Life, a magazine of Missouriana, and one acceptance by a nationally distributed magazine, The Young Athlete. Because it is extremely difficult for an inexperienced writer to compete with the professional freelancer in the nationally distributed magazines, the students are encouraged to consider smaller markets first, although we have occasionally queried the larger market

first, working our way down to state and regional markets. But I have found that the students have become more successful as I have become more experienced in knowing how the editorial mind functions and as I have grown with and because of the students.

A parting thought. I would not urge my own methodology and goals upon any teacher of advanced composition. Obviously, teachers are constrained by university and administrative policies and they are constrained by their own teaching styles. But I do find the lack of literature on advanced composition in the professional journals apalling. Perhaps we have wrestled too long and too much with freshman composition, being blown about by every social, cultural or political revolution coming down the pike.

I would urge my colleagues in the profession to demonstrate more concern with the course in which we train our undergraduate teachers of writing. For that reason alone, it is a most important course. And yet the limited number of journal articles indicates that we have not wrestled enough with what the course should entail. We have not shared our ideas, our prejudices, our presumptions, our own agony, our successes. The 1967 Guidelines for Advanced Composition are still valid, but only on a general level. They have not provoked a general discussion. I would challenge my colleagues to share their techniques and goals, to challenge and question each other, to develop as much a sense of community as those in Technical Writing have.

For that reason, I have requested that a special interest group room be reserved for teachers of Advanced Composition/Advanced Expository Writing at the 30th Annual Meeting of CCCC, Minneapolis, 1979.

The purpose will be to organize, determine needs and goals, elect officers, and determine how we shall exchange ideas--possibly in a small journal.

My suggested title for the group is Advanced Composition Teachers (ACT).

Many Advanced Expository Writing teachers have already indicated their interest in and support for such a group. I feel that we can all benefit from organization and therefore request your support in forming the organization next year at the convention.

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